

# TRIBE—CASTE AND TRIBE—PEASANT CONTINUA IN CENTRAL INDIA

SURAJIT SINHA

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**Abstract.** The relative position of the isolated Hill Maria and the Hinduized Bhumij tribe in Central India has been examined in terms of two ideal sets of continua : tribe—caste and tribe—peasant. The ideal tribe and the ideal caste may be defined both as social structure and as cultural pattern. Movement from the isolated tribal pole to the caste and peasant end involves a progression towards ethnic heterogeneity in social interaction, role specialization, social stratification and in enlargement and diversification in the networks of relationship with civilizational centres.

## *Introduction*

QUITE early in the course of their colonial rule in India, British administrators felt the necessity for labelling certain ethnic groups as 'tribes' on the basis of general impression about their physical and socio-cultural isolation from the mainstream of caste-bound Indian society. When Census Commissioners of India, since 1872, tried to follow the ideas of the administration they found it difficult to decide where the tribe ended and caste began ( Ghurye, 1943 : 1-24 ).

The same picture of gradual merging with the caste system became evident when anthropologists examined the position of the 'tribes' in India. In Central India, for example, Ghurye

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Dr. Surajit Sinha is Principal of the Palli Siksha Sadan, Visvabharati, P. O. Sriniketan, West Bengal.



presents an impressive array of evidence that the various groups labelled by the Government as 'tribes' are not isolated from the Hindu castes of the plains in distribution, language, economy and religious tradition ; nor are they necessarily the autochthones of the various regions where they now live. Ghurye is therefore inclined to regard the officially labelled tribal groups of Central India as 'backward Hindus,' i.e., groups imperfectly integrated with the caste system (ibid., Chapters 1-3). While Ghurye rules out the existence of isolated tribes in Central India, Elwin views the officially labelled tribes of the same region as belonging to four stages of acculturation : the most primitive, dependent on axe cultivation, the less wild aboriginals, acculturated tribes of the open lowlands and the acculturated tribal aristocrats. As one moves from the first category to the third, socio-economic life becomes more individualistic and communal art and sacred tradition degenerate. In the fourth category, there is a substantial recovery of order and poise in the few landed aristocrats arising out of the tribal population (Elwin, 1943 : 7-11). Both Ghurye and Elwin approach the subject in terms of an arbitrary cluster of traits without trying to define 'tribe' and 'caste' as two ideal socio-cultural 'systems'. From Elwin's writings, however, one may project the concept of an ideally unacculturated primitive tribe as marked by ecological isolation, backward food-production technology, communal solidarity, and a thorough interpenetration of social relations, aesthetics and religion. Students of Indian society, however, will find it difficult to accept that as one moves from the tribal to the caste society there is a necessary decline in communal solidarity or in the degree of integration of the sacred with the secular.

During 1950-53, when I became involved in the study of the processes by which the Bhumij, an officially Scheduled Tribe of Purulia and Singhbhum districts in West Bengal and Bihar, became integrated with the regional Hindu caste system, I felt the necessity for a systematic conceptionalization of an ideal tribe as the base-line of transformation. In a preliminary statement on the position of the tribes of Peninsular India in the general context of Indian civilization, I tried to define two



ideal levels of socio-cultural systems—the 'tribal' and the emergent level of 'Hindu peasantry'—in terms of a set of characteristics in habitat, economy, social structure and ideological system (Sinha, 1958 a). The peasant level included a number of emergent features like a surplus in economy based on settled agriculture, social stratification, ethical religion and puritanical value system as distinguished from the essentially egalitarian and non-puritanical tribal level (*ibid.*, 515).

In contrast with these earlier relatively unsystematic conceptualizations of the tribes, mainly in terms of a cluster of cultural traits, F. G. Bailey, in a recent series of brilliant publications, presents us with a more systematic 'interactional' model for considering the position of the tribe *vis-a-vis* caste on the basis of his field-work in tribal and peasant villages of Orissa (Bailey, 1960 and 1961). Bailey achieves this systematization by divesting his data of the unmanageable load of 'culture' and by restricting his analysis to the level of economics and politics. In the latter case, he states, Oriya caste society is predominantly 'organic', while the tribal society is 'segmentary'. In Oriya society, economic and political specializations are hierarchic, whereas the Kond clan-territory and its constituent villages are not hierarchically arranged, and they are not interdependent through economic specialization. It is emphasized that such basic differentiation need not take into consideration the fact that the Kond and their Oriya neighbours are precisely similar in kinship values and religious beliefs (Bailey, 1960 : 11). Restricting his emphasis on political behaviour, Bailey states : '...We must see "caste" and "tribe" as opposite ends of a single line. Particular societies are to be located at different points along this line, some nearer to the segmentary tribal model, others close to the model of an organic caste society. In other words, of each society we ask the question : to what extent is this society organized on segmentary principles and to what extent is it organic? We do not ask disjunctively : is this tribe or caste' (*ibid.*, 13-14). Bailey then faces the more difficult problem of specifying the criteria for deciding at what point on the continuum a parti-



cular society is to be placed. His answer is : 'The larger is the proportion of a given society which has direct access to the land, the closer is that society to the tribal end of the continuum. Conversely, the larger is the proportion of people whose right to land is achieved through a dependent relationship, nearer the society comes to the caste pole' (ibid., 14).

When I try to apply this test to the cases of partially hunting and gathering Kharia and the Pahira ethnic groups in Pargana Barabhum in the former district of Manbhum in Bihar, it does not work too well. The Kharia and the Pahira hold their homestead land as well as rights for hunting and collecting as dependents on other castes, and yet they have rather feeble social articulation with the rest of the Hindu society in the area. On the other hand, there are larger groups in the area like the Bhumij and the Mahato who dominate the demographic scene and landholding and are intricately involved in socio-ritual interaction with the caste system of the region. In the same manner, Baileys' characterization would bring many areas of Peasant India having regional 'dominant castes' such as Rajputs and Jats in the North and Okkaligas in the South, near the tribal pole, while these latter groups participate vigorously in the intricate hierarchy of inter-caste relationship in their respective regions. Rather than the proportion of land held in dependent relationship, it is likely that a society near the caste pole will be characterized by the degree of hierarchy in the regional land tenure system.<sup>1</sup> Even then, a positive correlation between the degree of organic differentiation in the caste system of a region and the degree of hierarchy in land tenure in the same area cannot be taken for granted. It should also be noted that while emphasizing the internal segmentary arrangement of the 'tribal' pole, Bailey's model tends to ignore the fact that one of the major features of the ideal tribe is its lack of interaction—dependent, dominant or equal—with other segmentary or organic social systems.

Notwithstanding the smoothness of his concept of the continuum, Bailey deserves the credit for clearing the ground for systematic treatment of the subject. His writings stimulate



me to look closely into the tribal position once more. This will be done in relation to two concrete field studies—the relatively isolated swidden cultivator Hill Maria Gond of Bastar studied by Edward Jay<sup>2</sup> and my own work among the plough cultivator Bhumij of Barabhum who have gone a long way toward integration with the Hindu caste system of the region (Sinha, 1953, 1959, 1962). These two cases will be examined in terms of continua, the poles of which will be viewed both in the framework of extended kinship, namely, tribe—caste, and that of territorial systems, tribe—peasant. Unlike Bailey, I am interested in viewing the tribe as a system of social relations as well as a state of mind and cultural tradition; both characterized basically by isolation and lack of stratification. I take both these aspects simultaneously (and yet distinctively) into consideration because the knowledge of one aspect adds to the understanding of the other.<sup>3</sup> The upper Hindu castes, for example, have not only feeble social interaction with the tribes, but the former also think that the tribes have their distinctive ‘unsophisticated’ and ‘wild’ way of life.<sup>4</sup> A knowledge of the ‘way of life’ (‘culture’) on the subjective as well as objective levels of the groups studied seem to be essential in fully grasping the nature of social interaction between them.

My characterization of tribe-caste and tribe-peasant polarities is quite obviously derived from Redfield’s earlier concepts of ‘folk—urban continuum’ and ‘peasant society and culture’ (Redfield, 1941, 1947, 1956). Only, the polarities will be re-defined and specially oriented to deal with the nature of the continuum in Central India.

The tribal end may be characterized by the following demographic and social structural features. It is isolated—in ecology, demography, economy, politics and other social relations—from other ethnic groups. This isolation generates, and in its turn, is bolstered by a strong in-group sentiment. Internally, the group is characterized by homogeneity on account of lack of social stratification and role specialization other than by age, sex and kinship. Such an ideally isolated, homogeneous and unstratified group is also marked by the following cultural features, some of which are direct inter-



dependent correlates of aspects of social structures mentioned above: viewing one's culture as autonomous with reference to those of other groups and consequently, disconnection from the Great Traditions of Indian civilization in terms of objective reality and in terms of subjective awareness; a value system of equality; closeness of the human, natural and the supernatural world; lack of systematization of ideas, a 'sophisticated' stratum of culture, ethical religion and puritanical asceticism.

In contrast with the isolated, homogeneous and unstratified 'tribe', 'caste' is typically connected, heterogeneous and stratified and is characterized by the following social structural features: multi-ethnic residence in the local community; inter-ethnic participation in an economy involving occupational specialization by ethnic groups and stratified land tenure; ranked and interdependent interaction with other ethnic groups. Similarly, the following critical features distinguish the caste pole of the level of 'culture': interaction with the sub-cultures of other ethnic groups in the region; interaction with the Great Traditions; polarization of lay and elite cultures with elaboration and systematization of cultural ideals in the latter; hierarchic view of social relations bolstered by the concept of ritual pollution; emergence of ethical religion and a puritanical view of life.<sup>5)</sup>

If, instead of 'caste' or extended corporate kin groups, we shift the frame of reference to the territorial community of the multi-caste 'peasant' village, most of the characteristics noted for ideal caste will also hold there. In addition, the peasant village community has extensive territorial affiliations with multiple centres of civilization through a diverse network of relationship.<sup>6)</sup> Also, the cultural system of the peasant village is heterogeneous in terms of internal division into caste and class and in its complex external relations with a heterogeneous region having specialized centres of cultural nucleation. The tribal villages in contrast are typically uni-ethnic and their external relations are limited to villages lying in a homogeneous culture area lived in by the same ethnic group.

Movement from the isolated tribal pole to the caste and



peasant end thus involves a progression toward ethnic heterogeneity in social interaction, role specialization, social stratification and emergence of elite classes and enlargement and diversification of territorial network with civilizational centres. There is the corresponding movement toward cultural heterogeneity in terms of ethnic heterogeneity and social stratification and greater systematization of cultural ideals along with interaction with the Great Traditions.

Although our concern here does not exceed the peasant or caste range, it seems obvious that concentration of the above series of characters ultimately leads us to a level beyond the range of our empirical knowledge and notions about the limits of peasant communities in India. The ultimate opposite pole of the tribal end would, therefore, be an urban level of a special kind which would fit in with the characters of an 'orthogenetic' city as defined by Redfield and Singer as an ideal type.<sup>7</sup>

If we shift the frame of reference back to ethnic group from territorial community, it is feasible to raise the question as to what kind of caste group is ideally most remote from the tribal end. Here again, we can face the issue both in terms of social structure and culture. Ideally, such a group tends to live in highly hetero-ethnic centres or cities and exert authority by political power, wealth and knowledge of the most prestigious level of traditional culture, over a wide-range network of inter-ethnic relationship. Whereas the tribe has least relationship as well as control over the regional social organization of a civilization, the ideal caste has maximum connectedness and control. Correspondingly, the culture of the ideal elite caste has maximum access to the Great Tradition and to the highest grade of regional sophistication of culture.<sup>8</sup> We are also assuming here that the lowest castes within the Hindu society come close to the tribes in terms of social and cultural isolation from the level of the ideal elite caste (Das, 1960).

It should be specified that our concept of tribe—caste and tribe—peasant continua is mainly concerned with the processes by which tribes are integrated with the traditional civilization of India. As an artificial construct it avoids considering the



more modern phases of cultural transformation simultaneously affecting tribal and peasant India away from status and handicraft bound social order.<sup>9</sup>

### *The Hill Maria Gonds,*

#### *A group near the tribal pole*

The Hill Maria Gonds of Bastar district represent the most isolated segment of the Dravidian Gondi-speaking people of Central India. They occupy nearly 1,500 square miles of area in the northwest part of Bastar district. Their habitat is typically hilly and jungle-clad. Communication is still mainly based on travel by foot, as even bullock carts cannot penetrate this difficult terrain.

Grigson writes: 'There are only between 150 and 160 villages inhabited in all this area of about 1,500 miles and there are only 11,500 Hill Marias. This means one village in every 10 square miles and less than 8 persons to the square mile. In few places can you lose yourself in such solitude'. (Grigson, 1949 : 28). Thus the average sized village contains about 75 people or 15 families. About the interior villages, Jay estimates the average population as only about 50, i.e., 10 families, and the villages range between 20 to 300 in population. And most of these villages are uni-ethnic, that is, lived exclusively by the Hill Marias: 'The tract is extremely homogeneous. In the 22 Hill Maria villages in Kutru with 1,443 Hill Marias the only non-Marias are 38 Rawat and 1 Halba.... Most of the Hill Maria villages are in Antagarh, and have hardly any outsiders except occasional Rawats or liquor contractors. The few blacksmiths are really Marias, knowing no other language than Maria, having the same clans as the Marias...' (ibid., 50). The village of Orcha at the foot of Abujhmarh Hills studied during 1958-59 by Jay is one of the larger-sized Hill Maria villages and contains 38 families of which 33 are Maria, and there are 2 Halba jewellers, 2 Halba distillers, and 1 Maria blacksmith family.

Grigson writes on the basis of his field experiences between 1927 and 1934: 'In most Hill Maria parishes *penda*<sup>10</sup> is the



only kind of cultivation' (ibid., 127). In the foothills village of Orcha, however, Jay found in 1959 a combination of swidden and plough cultivation of rice. Twenty families did both, 11 only rice, 4 only slash-and-burn, and 4 did not do any cultivation. Although plough cultivation has penetrated considerably in the Maria economy of Orcha, even yet the Marias are supposed to value the slash-and-burn form of cultivation in a very emotional way.

Grigson emphasizes the corporate nature of Maria agricultural enterprise in the interior areas: 'The Hill Maria still regards the crops as the combined labours of the village rather than of the labour of the individuals. If one suffers, all suffer, and all combine to support the old and the needy, and to help each fellow villager to get through the heaviest part of the yearly round. In the raising of crops, then, the village and not the individual cultivator is the unit, even now, in the Abujhmarh Hills' (ibid., 1959 : 125).

Although the Hill Marias are by and large self-sufficient in their subsistence economy, they do obtain from outside sources such important items as cloth, iron implements, earthenware, brass pots, ornaments, salt, grindstones and various trinkets. The most important means of procuring these is at the weekly market. Glasfurd in 1862 reported that except for immediately around the headquarter town of Jagdalpur there was 'not a bazaar in the country' (Glasfurd, 1862 : 121-2). But nowadays, although there is not a single market located within the typical habitat of the Maria in the Abujhmarh Hills, there are weekly markets distributed along the edges of the hills. The villagers of Orcha, for example, regularly attend the market at Dhaurai lying 19 miles away of walking distance. The Maria sells his cash crop of mustard seed at the market. The money thus earned is spent largely on cloth, household utensils, iron implements, ornaments, and liquor.

Besides attending the weekly market, the people of Orcha procure their pots from the annual religious fair at Narayanpur. Iron implements, some jewellery and some earthen pots are procured from wandering artisans. Thus the Maria have to come in contact with about four or five artisan groups either



at the market, or as itinerant traders or as transient or, rarely, as permanent settlers in their own village.

Maria social structure is essentially segmentary in character. Patrilineal clan is the largest effective corporate group, further organized into moities, 'brother-clans' and 'wife-clans'. The clans are regarded as equal in status. The tribe is the widest extension of kin-like ties. Although in theory the tribe includes the entire Gond (Koitor) people, in reality the line of endogamy does not extend beyond the Hill Maria group. Most of the villages in the interior of Abujmarh Hills are uni-clan communities.

It appears that the interior villages of Abujmarh, where the Maria live almost exclusively on swidden cultivation and as uni-ethnic and uni-clan communities, there is no stratification in terms of land-holding, and the religious headman of the village, the Kasyeq-gaita or the secular headman, the Gaita, are only *primus inter pares* among the village elders. The right of permanent individual ownership of land is acceded only to the few permanent rice fields in the interior of Abujmarh. Above the village level there are parganas, which according to Grigson, are mostly clan areas, and the Pargana Gaita or the head of the pargana is again 'merely *primus inter pares* in regard to...the Gaitas and Kasyeq-gaitas of the other villages of the clan or pargana' (Grigson, 1949 : 290).

Although so unstratified within themselves, the Hill Maria, at least some of the adult informants of Jay in the village of Orcha, are aware of 12 other ethnic groups living within the range of their social contact and rank them in some kind of consistent order.

The three criteria usually employed by the informants in caste-ranking were : occupation, wearing of the sacred thread and acceptance of food. It is to be noted that most of the elders of the village were reluctant to rank the 13 castes, but ultimately Jay was able to obtain judgment from six individuals at Orcha. Among these six individuals, again, only the village headman was able to specify the rank of all the 13 castes. The various castes are not conceptualized as 'high'



or 'low', but as 'big' or 'small'. They were placed in the following three major blocks :

1. Big : Bahman (priest)  
Dakar (cultivator)  
Hindu (including Chhatisgarhis and Halbas) .  
Kallar (distiller, cultivator)  
Kopal (cowherd)
2. Own : Koitor (i.e. Gond)
3. Small : Pathan (Muslims : shopkeeper, cultivator)  
Isai (Christian)  
Mahar (weaver)  
Gandi (weaver)  
Ghasia (jewellery maker)  
Wade (blacksmith)  
Chamara (leather worker)

Thus all of the Hindu or Hinduized groups other than those who practice 'degrading' occupations, were placed in the 'big' caste category. And the Hill Maria seem to have adopted the characteristic Hindu attitude of regarding the Muslim and the Christians as ritually 'low'. The informants, while being aware that their inclusive category 'Hindu' includes a number of specific castes such as Chhatisgarhis, Halbas, potters, etc., were unable to ascertain their mutual rank.

The Hill Maria have a strong concept of ritual pollution with reference to violation of the rule of tribal endogamy and sexual relationship with members of the lower castes and also with regard to acceptance of cooked food and water from members of the 'smaller' caste block. But in spite of their well-developed concept of ritual pollution and having at least a simplified concept of caste hierarchy (without reference to the Varna Order), the Hill Maria do not have access to ritual service from any such caste of critical importance as the Brahman, barber or washerman castes. According to Jay, caste ranking in this area is based on what Marriott has called 'attributional' in contrast to 'interactional' factors (Marriott, 1955).



If we use Marriott and Cohn's concept of 'network and centers' (Marriott and Cohn, 1958), the interior uni-ethnic Maria villages are indeed connected to a rather simple network of extra-local relationships and with few elaborately differentiated centres. The Maria interactions are largely restricted to their own ethnic area in terms of kinship, marriage and ritual ties. The pan-tribal Pat Raja worship in the village of Irpanar is one important case of emergence of a complex centre within the tribal field. The Maria also come out of the tribal habitat to visit weekly markets and religious fairs sponsored by other castes in larger non-Maria dominated villages. The people of Orcha, for example, regularly visit the weekly market at Dhavri and some of them also attend the annual fair at the Halba-dominated village of Chota Dongar and the Tahsil headquarter village of Narayanpur. Some of them used to go even to the town of Jagdalpur, the headquarter of the Maharaja of Bastar on the occasion of the annual Dussehra festival. But admittedly, the Maria connexion with this only centre of some complexity is quite tenuous and marginal.

The principal deities of the Hill Maria are : ancestral spirits, clan gods, earth goddess and the village mother or small-pox goddess. Besides these localized gods there are also gods of somewhat larger regional scope. We have already mentioned the pan-tribal cult of worship of the god Pat Raja and his consort Pat Rani at the village of Irpanar. We have also referred to the marginal participation of the Hill Maria in the cult of Danteswari Maoli, an incarnation of the Great Traditional Hindu goddess of Durga, sponsored by the Maharaja of Bastar.

All the above gods are offered rituals in relation to pragmatic concern with physical well-being, fertility and property. But the Hill Maria do have a vague concept of *Karma* or rebirth guided by a sense of connexion with ethical standard of conduct. A few of Jay's informants related : 'People say that rebirth depends on how good you are in this life. If you are a good person you will come back as man ;



but if you are evil you come back as a crow or lizard.' However, such a belief in rebirth is only feebly developed if you would compare it with the situation in the Bhumij tribe : 'Although most of the Orcha elders had heard about rebirth, they all expressed skepticism about it, and only a small number (about a fifth of the 35 questioned) added the idea of rebirth into higher or lower forms of animal life depending on ethical conduct in the first life' (Jay, 1961 : 23). The above clearly indicates the exogenous nature of the concept of *Karma*. There is no report that the Maria pray to the gods to save them from sin.

Jay finds a good deal of similarity between the contents of Maria religion and that of the Hindus in ordinary peasant villages : worship of ancestral spirits, mother goddess, powerful male gods ; a vague belief in a great god or Supreme Being, feasting, dancing and noisy processions as prominent features of ceremonial life, animal sacrifice and ritual offering ; use of certain ritual objects as red powder, grain, iron, peacock feathers and chains ; a belief in re-incarnation and more vaguely in *Karma* ; shamans and priests in specialized roles (Jay, 1961 : 38). But Jay also observes that the Maria lack ritual specialization and that they do not find a need for the religious specialists of the Hindu Great Tradition, and that recognizable Sanskritic elements are understandably rare in Maria religion (ibid.).

Something may now be said about Maria value system. The Hill Maria, in the characteristic way of many such isolated tribal groups, sharply distinguish between themselves, *Koitor* (men) and outsiders or strangers. We have already mentioned the essentially egalitarian and co-operative social ethic of the interior villages. The natural non-ascetic pleasure orientation of the Hill Maria is quite vivid. Grigson writes : 'In natural cheerfulness few races can surpass the Hill Marias, who, like all Gonds are quick to see the fun of things.' (Grigson, 1949 : 93) Grigson also writes : 'No value is set on premarital chastity, and it is doubtful whether any girl preserves her virginity until her marriage' (ibid., 247).



## III

*The Bhumij of Barabhum : Within the threshold of the caste and the peasant pole*

Whereas W. V. Grigson, the early ethnographer of the Hill Maria groups, was impressed by the fact of intense isolation, clan and village solidarity, and the habitually gay disposition of his subject of study, H. H. Risley, the pioneer ethnographer of the Bhumij, during his tours of the Bhumij tract in the 1880's was impressed by the degree of social stratification and rank consciousness among these people and by the fact that the group was hardly distinguishable from a Hindu caste. 'Here a pure Dravidian race have lost their original language and now speak only Bengali ; they worship Hindu gods in addition to their own (the tendency being to relegate the tribal gods to the women) and the more advanced among them employ Brahmans as family priests. They still retain a set of totemistic exogamous subdivisions closely resembling those of the Mundas and Santals. But they are beginning to forget the totems which the names of the subdivisions denote, and the names themselves will probably soon be abandoned in favour of more aristocratic designations. The tribe will then have become a caste in the full sense of the word and will go stripping itself of all customs likely to betray its true descent' (Risley, 1915 : 75 ; see also Risley, 1889 : 113-125). During 1950-53 and 1956-59, when we studied the Bhumij, it was observed that the Bhumij had moved even farther in the direction of Hinduization since Risley's times (Sinha, 1953, 1957, 1958 b, 1959, 1961, 1962).

According to the Census of 1931, the total Bhumij population in India was 375, 938 people and this included 16, 797 persons settled in Assam as plantation labourers. The typical habitat of the people is roughly the contiguous area of southern Manbhum, Dhalbhum Subdivision, Saraikella, Kharswan, Mayurbhanj and the neighbouring areas in Midnapur and Bankura districts of West Bengal. In this extensive area the Bhumij do not form more than 9% of the population in any district. We shall focus our attention in this



paper on a narrower region, namely, the Pargana or revenue estate of Barabhum in the former Manbhum district of Bihar, which covers an area of 635 square miles, 244,733 people and 596 revenue villages or mauzas.

Although Barabhum is not nearly as inaccessible, hilly and jungle-clad as the Abujmarh Hills, it has its own substantial share of hills, jungles and uplands. The northern part of the Pargana is relatively plain, and the whole area has been subjected to extensive deforestation during the last one hundred years. To-day, except for the Dalma Range marking the southern boundary of the Pargana, the rest of the area is accessible by bullock-cart roads, and for over half a century a branch of the South-Eastern Railway has cut across the northern edge of the Pargana and there are also a few motorable roads running through the area. The dominant landscape of the region is terraced paddy fields.

Such an open landscape with settled rice cultivation, of course, supports a much greater density of population than in the Abujmarh Hills. Population per square mile in 1957-58 was 386. The villages are distributed nearly at the rate of 1 per square mile and, on the average, a village contains 411 people. On the average, each village has 6 castes. Out of a total of 576 inhabited villages, only 41 are uni-ethnic; of these, only 6 are lived in by the Bhumij. There are also two semi-urbanized centres, Barabazar (4,307 people, 29 ethnic groups) and Balarampur (8,414 people, 45 ethnic groups).

Although the Bhumij are regarded as the earliest inhabitants of the Pargana, and have a monopoly over privileged inalienable *Khuntkatti* lands, and hold the majority of the traditional police tenure offices,<sup>11</sup> they are not ethnically the most numerous group in Barabhum. With 37,947 people they form only 15% of the population, whereas the Santal constitute 16% and the Kurmi 30%. There are, on the whole, 64 ethnic groups in the Pargana which includes such ritually significant groups as the Brahman (8,421 people, 3.44%), Vaishnava (4,203 people, 1.72%), Napit (4,373 people, 1.79%) and Dhoba (409 people, 0.07%). The above data should suffice to convey the extent to



which the Bhumij live in a demographically denser and ethnically heterogeneous region when compared with the Hill Maria region of Abujhmarh.

The Bhumij, like the neighbouring Santal and Mahato are settled agriculturists cultivating rice with the plough. Agriculture is mainly subsistence oriented and is not a major source for earning cash. The important cash crops are oil seeds and tobacco ; but the main regular source of cash earning is rearing lac resin on privately owned trees.

Unlike the Maria, the Bhumij have strong concern for individual ownership of land. The clan does not have any corporate property other than the clan ossuary site, and the lineage only exerts some pressure against sale or transfer of shares of ancestral landed property to people outside the group. There is considerable differentiation in land-holding among the Bhumij in a village. For example, in the village of Madhupur, out of a total of 142 families, 32 (22.5%) are landless, 18 (12.7%) have less than 1 acre of land, 43 (30.3%) have 1-2 acres of land, 6 (4.2%) have 2-3 acres, 16 (9.9%) have 3-4 acres, 14 (11.3%) have 4-5 acres, 10 (7.0%) have 5-10 acres and only 3 (2.1%) have more than 10 acres of land. The village headman holds 44 acres of land rent free as service tenure and he also gets rent from his tenants in the village. The villagers are aware of the following categories of land owners : landless labourers, poor cultivators, substantial cultivators and the village headman. Within this village of seven ethnic groups, the Bhumij own more than 4/5 of the land, and then in a decreasing order, the Kurmi-Mahato and the Sundi. The Tanti and the Kharia practically own no agricultural land.

Although the Bhumij hold the bulk of the traditional feudal tenures and in a large number of villages dominate land-ownership, their dominance is not uniformly distributed over the region. As many as 49 villages were given to Brahmans as rent free religious tenures (*Brahmottar* and *Debottar*) by the Raja of Barabhum. In these villages, the Bhumij are subordinate tenure-holders. The Bhumij are in subordinate tenure relation to other castes such as the Mahato, Kayastha, Sundi, Baniya in some villages in the Pargana.



Whereas there is not a single weekly market in the 1500 square mile area on the Abujmarh Hills, the typical habitat of the Maria, the area of 635 square miles of Barabhum contains 12 weekly markets. At regular intervals of 3 to 5 miles one comes across a weekly market (Sinha *et al.* 1961 : 133). In one such market (Bamni) regularly visited by me, there were as many as 15 different artisan castes selling their wares and 7 different trader castes participating in the market. The total number of ethnic groups participating in the market might be over 30 (*ibid.*).

Like the Maria, the Bhumij are divided into a number of patrilineal exogamous clans or *gotras*, which are affiliated with the respective ancestral villages where the clan ossuaries are located. The clans tend to be localized around the ossuary village ; but there is no clear-cut clan territory or corporate organization in terms of clan. The clans are segmented into functional patrilineages with equivalent status for the further segments. This imparts a sense of equality among the Bhumij families tied by kinship who may possess wealth quite differentially.

But lineage solidarity cannot smooth the marked tendency toward stratification in Bhumij society. Apart from differential land-holding and position in the land revenue hierarchy, the Bhumij are divided into several socio-ritually defined marriage classes, partly corresponding with the land revenue hierarchy. At the lowest rung are the 'degraded' *Nichu* and *Patit* strata, while the bulk belong to the *Nagadi* class, who have access to the ritual service of 'degraded' Brahmans, but do not abstain from taking chicken or liquor. The *Ataishey* class are the fief-holders of about 12 villages who also employ 'degraded' Brahmans, but avoid taking chicken and liquor. The more prosperous fief-holders aspire to be recognized as Rajput Kshatriyas, and it is likely that the royal Kshatriya lineage of Barabhum is also of Bhumij origin (Sinha, 1962 : 38-57).

The very demographic situation places the Bhumij within easy reach of a number of ethnic groups. And often, having a dominant position in the land revenue administration and in land-holding, they have certain advantages in participating in



inter-ethnic interaction. It is, therefore, not surprising that whereas the Hill Maria participate quite remotely in stratified ranking in terms of caste, the Bhumij are more vividly involved in it. Their participation in the regional caste system is indeed quite interactional. They have access to the ritual services of the Brahman, Vaishnava, Barber and Washerman castes and some very low caste groups such as the Sahis, Dom and Ghasi, who serve as their midwives. A wider range of castes is tied to the Bhumij in terms of ceremonial friendship, participation in festivals, share-cropping and market relationship (Sinha, 1957).<sup>1 2</sup>

The Bhumij respondents were immediately interested in ranking when five of them were asked to rank 28 local castes in a hierarchy. Three assigned a separate rank to each caste, one recognized 21 ranks and another 20. The Brahman was invariably ranked highest and the second position was assigned either to the Rajput or the Vaishnava. They ranked themselves as superior to all the other castes, knowing fully well that the Brahman does not accept water from them and does not consider them to be a 'clean' caste.

In their desire to be recognized as Rajput Kshatriyas, the Bhumij have been intensely involved in social mobility movements under the guidance of the *Ataishey* upper class (Sinha, 1959).

Even within Barabhum itself, there are important multi-ethnic villages which can be considered as specialized 'centres' of 'networks of relationship' connected with the Bhumij inhabited villages. The most important traditional centre is, of course, Barabazar, the headquarter of the chief of Barabhum. It is a centre for administration, market interaction, temple cult and of large regional festivals. The more recently grown town of Balarampur, containing forty-five ethnic groups, is essentially a business centre grown around processing of lac. Then there are lesser centres, forming the headquarters of the fief-holders of various orders and the temporary large gatherings at a number of fairs at regular intervals (Sinha, 1957 and 1958 b). But for the Bhumij the network extends much farther. Some consider it essential



to throw the ashes of the dead into the Ganges near Calcutta, lying about 200 miles away. On this occasion, they make it a point to visit the famous temple of Kalighat and see the museum and the zoo. A few families have even gone to the distant city of Gaya to offer rice balls (*pinda*) to the ancestral spirits, and also to the sacred town of Puri to attain religious merit by offering obeisance to the god Jagannath. Some cherish the desire to visit the pan-Indian sacred centres of Kasi, Prayag, Mathura and Brindaban. But no Bhumij of Barabhum, to my knowledge, has gone on such distant pilgrimages.

Let us consider now some aspects of the value system and of the cultural structure of the Bhumij. The Bhumij have a strong feeling that they are the true autochthones of Barabhum, as their ancestors had cleared the forests to develop cultivable lands, and, as such, they look upon most of the 63 ethnic groups of the Pargana, except the hunting and gathering Kharia and the Pahira, as relative outsiders. But this inside/outside sentiment is not so strongly developed as is evidenced by *Koitor/non-Koitor* categorization among the Hill Maria Gonds or *Horo (man)/Diku* (foreigner—non-men) categorization among the less acculturated Munda of Ranchi. I have shown elsewhere that, beginning with their own groups, the Bhumij range the various ethnic groups of the region at different points of socio-cultural distance from them, beginning with the closest, roughly as follows: (1) the Kharia, Pahira and the Santal, Hindu artisan castes, Barbers, Washermen, (2) Mahato, (3) Brahman, Vaishnava, (4) Rajput-Kshatriya, (5) 'Bengali' castes: Baniya, Kayastha, Tamli, etc., (6) Bihari castes, with whom the Bhumij do not share a common language (Sinha, 1957: 33-37). This evaluation is mainly based on their idea of relative exogenousness of the various groups mentioned above.

The Bhumij continue to worship many of their traditional gods and goddesses such as Marangburu (the Mountain God), various hill gods, gods and goddesses of the Sacred Grove, and so on. But the worship of these gods does not have the same prestige as worshipping the gods of the Hindu Great Tradition,



such as Siva, Durga and Kali. The names of such gods and goddesses as Siva, Durga, Kali, Manasa, Saraswati, Lakshmi, Srikrishna, Rama, Jagannath, Ganesa and Balaram were known to all of my 40 informants (20 male and 20 female), but they expressed vague and contradictory notions about the attributes of these gods and goddesses. Thirty-eight out of the 40 informants did not show awareness that these gods were associated with moral qualities.

Most of the informants, however, spelled out some conception of re-incarnation, heaven, hell, sin and virtue. In most cases, it appeared clear that merit-earning was being viewed quite mechanically without 'moral flavour'. A few Bhumijes in the village of Madhupur became involved in self-conscious reflection on the Hindu theological concepts under the influence of wandering Vaisnava sadhus. Some of these Bhumijes were also literate and were quite capable of expounding the complex themes in such sacred texts as *Chaitanya Charitamrita*, *Srimadbhagabat*, etc., to the non-literate Bhumij listeners. These Bhumijes certainly operated as the 'literati' commenting on the Great Traditions within their limited social range (Sinha, 1953). The religious theme of the celestial love of Radha and Krishna provides a major stimulus to the composition of the songs and the dances of Barabhum. Excessive emphasis is often placed by wandering sadhus on the ascetic quality of withholding loss of semen during sexual intercourse, and of avoiding drinking intoxicating liquor and eating meat (ibid.).

The Bhumij share a good lot of the Marias' gay sensuality; but this, again, is slightly toned down by a concern to appear good in the eyes of the upper caste Hindus. The zest for mixed dancing, drinking and festivity is opposed by reformist mobility movements (Sinha, 1959). Although a good deal of premarital sex life is tolerated, there is also considerable overt concern about the chastity of the female folk.

The co-existence of segmentary and hierarchic principles in the social structure is reflected in the sphere of the value system. The Bhumij of the village of Madhupur, for example, look



upon the headman as an equal in terms of lineage membership, but also show some deference to him for holding a position of power, wealth and prestige. The headman is more than *primus inter pares*. The hierarchic principle is also expressed in male—female relationship, restricting the sphere of activity and freedom of movement of the female as one moves up the social hierarchy.

The position of the Bhumij in the regional caste system comes out in relief if we compare them with the partially hunting and gathering Kharia and Pahira who live in isolated hamlets in the foothills of Pargana Barabhum. They are not only ecologically isolated but have no access to the service of the ritual specialist castes. They have unusually simple notions about the regional caste hierarchy, are internally homogeneous and less puritanical than the Bhumij in their notion of premarital sex, and have very feeble knowledge of the Great Traditions (Bannerjee, 1959, Dasgupta, 1959 and Sinha, 1957). They are comparable to the Hill Marias in many ways, other than the fact that their settlements are like scattered islands in an ethnically heterogeneous Pargana dominated by other castes.

### *Summing up*

As we move our focus from the Abujmarh Hill Marias to the Bhumij of Barabhum, it indeed involves a rather sharp swing from near the ideal 'tribe' pole to near the 'peasant' and 'caste' pole (Table I). Here we find a systematic and yet sharp progression toward lessening of ecological isolation and increase in ethnic heterogeneity in regional demographic pattern and in social interaction, social stratification and emergence of indigenous elite class and enlargement and diversification of the network of spatially defined social relationship with civilizational centres. In cultural structure also the movement is toward the development of regional cultural heterogeneity in terms of ethnic diversity, social stratification and role specialization; greater inclusion of Hindu Great Traditions and of ethical slant in religion, and greater emphasis on puritanical values.



The final contours of the two polarities are guided by the degree of ethnic heterogeneity and the degree of the complexity and hierarchy in the pattern of interaction between and within the ethnic groups of a region. The above factors, in their turn, are directly dependent on the nature of territorial isolation of the group under consideration. It is also obvious that an adequate technological base ( like wet plough cultivation (?) ) is needed to support the level of complexity in inter-ethnic interaction near the caste pole. It cannot, however, be stated without rigorous quantitative study that there is any direct correlation between the level of technological efficiency and nearness to the idealized caste pole. In the Bhumij case, at least, we know that population density, ethnic heterogeneity and social hierarchy in the area are sustained by settled plough cultivation, regional craft and market organization and the supervisory role of the chief in the hierarchic land revenue organization of the Pargana. It cannot, however, be stated that technological evolution, population growth and increase in settlement size could generate a caste system in a tribal area.

The kind of regularity in progression revealed by comparing two societies so obviously apart in their possible position in our ideally conceived continuum may mislead us to imagine that it may be a simple task to evaluate the relative position of more nearly related societies on the proposed continuum. It is quite likely that within the proximal range, all the criteria used in defining the continua will not move at the same rate. A group may be ahead of another in market participation but behind in sharing Great Traditional gods and ethical slant in religion. But the easy case of comparing two widely contrastive cases like the Hill Maria and the Bhumij certainly encourages us to explore the finer ranges of differentiation.



TABLE 1

*The Hill Maria Gond and the Bhumij : their levels of complexity*

Tribe	Caste Peasant
Hill Maria Gond (M. P.)	Bhumij (W. Bengal-Bihar)
A. Geology : Hill and forest	A. 2/3 undulating plains, 1/3 forest
B. Population :	B.
1. Total 12 000	1. 375, 938
2. Density, 8 per sq. mile	2. 386
3. 1 village in 10 sq. mile	3. 1 village in 1 sq. mile
4. Village size, 75 persons	4. 411 persons
C. Ethnic complexity	C.
1. Uni-ethnic villages	1. Average village contains 6 ethnic groups
2. Uni-ethnic tribal tract	2. The Bhumij form 15% of the population of Pargana Barabhum containing 64 ethnic groups
D. Technology and economy	D.
1. Swidden	1. Wet rice cultivation
2. No market within the tribal tract	2. Market at regular intervals of 3-5 miles
3. Communal ownership of swidden land	3. A hierarchic land revenue organization involving at least four levels of sub-infeudation.
E. Internal stratification practically none	E. Considerable feudalization of the political structure and corresponding recognition of at least three nearly endogamous socio-ritual classes
F. Caste-like interaction	F.
1. Ranked in 3 strata	1. 20 to 28 ranks
2. No non-tribal ritual specialists employed	2. At least 4 categories of castes employed



## NOTES

1. Marriott states : '... some formalities and fixity of lands and offices through the device of greater state seems everywhere to underlie the order of caste ranking (1955 : 189).'

2. I take this opportunity to convey my gratefulness to Edward Jay for very generously permitting me to use his analyzed field data on the Hill Maria of Bastar for this paper. He has been responsible to a considerable extent in stimulating me to view the Hill Maria and the Bhumij in terms of a continuum. A comprehensive survey of Pargana Barabhum was possible only on account of collaboration of Biman Kumar Dasgupta and Hemendra Nath Bannerjee of the Anthropological Survey of India during 1957-59.

3. One good example of effective combination of social structure with culture as two distinct frames of analysis in the examination of a problem is Fallers' observation that East African tribes are 'Peasants' on the level of social structure, but not on the level of culture (Fallers, 1961 : 110). See also Marriott's treatment of the nature of isolation and connectedness of a village in India (Marriott, 1955) and Geertz' study of changes in religion in Java (Geertz, 1957).

4. Dumont speaks of Pramalai Kallar as follows : 'It is not without some reason that the same people were in the past called a "tribe." Coupled with their isolation, their independent moral character and their lack of refinement, in contrast to the more sophisticated Hindus, stamp them as atypical in comparison with castes living in the more complex settlements of the well-watered neighbouring valley and more closely enmeshed in the fabric of caste interrelationships' (1962, 120-22).

5. Both Bailey and Jay remark that the tribal groups studied by them, namely, the Kond and the Hill Maria respectively, are more isolated from the world of the Hindu peasantry in social interactions than in sharing of cultural traits (Bailey, 1961 : 11, Jay, 1959 : 82-3). Thus in contrast to Fallers' observation in East Africa, these tribal groups fulfil the cultural requisites of peasant society without fulfilling them on the level of social structure. Although I am not pleading a case for complete congruence between social structure and culture, my general observation on the tribes of Central India is that their social isolation and lack of specialization and stratification is also reflected on the level of culture.



6. Cohn and Marriott state in an exploratory paper: 'The integration of Indian Civilization depends on at least two kinds of supralocal and social patterns: networks of relationships and relationships with centers. India's characteristically loose and partial integrating of great social and cultural diversity may be attributed in part to the fact that her networks are varied, widespread, and complex, while her civilizational centers are multiple, overlapping in jurisdiction, and internally heterogeneous' (Marriott and Cohn, 1958).

7. Redfield and Singer state that the main role of the city of 'orthogenetic transformation' is to 'carry forward, develop, elaborate a long established local culture or civilization' (1954).

8. This concept of 'ideal' caste is not quite the same as the more concrete concept of 'dominant caste' propounded by Srinivas:

'Numerical strength, economic and political power, ritual status and Western education and occupations, are the most important elements of dominance. Usually the different elements of dominance are distributed among different castes in a village. When a caste enjoys all or most of the elements of dominance, it may be said to have decisive dominance' (Srinivas, 1959 : 15).

9. Although the predominant historical trend in Central India has been unidirectional, namely, communities moving toward the caste-peasant pole from the tribal end, our abstract scheme does not rule out the possibility of exploring 'tribalization' of castes.

10. *Penda* is the local term for swidden cultivation.

11. The Bhumij hold majority of the traditional feudal tenures under the Raja of Barabhum, namely, Ghatwali or headmanship of a single village, Sadiyali or chieftaincy over about a dozen villages and Tarai Sardari or superior chieftaincy over about 35 to 97 villages (Sinha, 1962 : 44-45).

12. By their numerical strength, holding of superior feudal tenures, large share in agricultural lands and elaborate participation in the ritual interactions of the regional caste system, the Bhumij indeed fit in with Srinivas' category of 'dominant caste.' The Bhumijes' traditional dominance, however, is shared and competed with by the late-comer agriculturist Mahato who now form 30% of the population of the Pargana.

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